

FREEZING HERBS

Freezing retains colour & flavour as well as most of the nutritive value of the fresh young leaves. The easiest way to freeze herbs is simply pack them into plastic bags, label and freeze. Store small packets in larger rigid containers in the freezer to avoid possibility of them being lost or damaged. Alternatively, put finely chopped herbs into ice cube trays and top up with water. One average cube holds 1tbl sp (15ml) of chopped herb and 1 tbl sp (15ml) of water. Flowers & leaves such as borage or mint are particularly attractive, frozen individually in ice cubes for drinks.

STORING HERBS

Once dried, remove leaves from stems. Keep them whole so they retain their scent & goodness for as long as possible. Break them up only if you have to fit them into jars. Leaves should be stored in dark glass air tight bottles, away from sunlight, moisture & dust. Label bottles with the name & date. If you notice any condensation on the glass, the leaves were not dried enough before storage. Remove them immediately and dry them further.

OTHER METHODS

The flavour of herbs can be preserved in herb vinegars & oils. This is an excellent method for well flavoured culinary herbs and the resulting liquid makes an interesting addition to dressings, pickles & marinades.

DRYING LEAVES

Choose a warm, dry, dark situation with adequate ventilation - an airing cupboard, warm loft or outhouse for example. A drying temperature of 90 degrees F (32 celsius) is ideal for the first 24hrs with a reduced temperature of 75 degrees F (24-26 celsius) thereafter. Leaves which are not unduly thick will take about four days at these temperatures. Allow 1-2 weeks in cooler temperatures. Hang stems of leaves such as sage, rosemary, savoury & thyme in small bunches, tied with string. Do not pack stems too tightly as air needs to circulate. About 10 stems at a time should be maximum. Hang bunch stems upwards. When drying is completed, the leaves should be paper dry and fragile but not so that they powder on contact.

Herbs In The Kitchen

Used judiciously, herbs can transform a routine meal into a sensuous experience of tangy, spicy, refreshing flavours and crunchy textures. The aromatic leaves of rosemary and thyme delicately permeate cooked dishes, the seed of dill, fennel & anise add piquancy to fish, salads & vegetables, while the earthy flavoured leaves of lovage and smallage lend body to soups & casseroles.

BAY

Bay is one herb that is better dried than fresh. Use it with parsley and thyme to make a bouquet garni. Add a leaf or two to marinades, stock, pates, stuffings and curries. When poaching fish, add a bay leaf to the water. A leaf in a storage jar of rice will impart its flavour to the rice. Add at the start of cooking and remove before serving.

BASIL

Indispensable for many Mediterranean dishes, the fresh leaf has a sweet clove like spiciness and is superb on fresh tomatoes with a little salad oil, and in hot tomato dishes. Basil adds interest to rice salads and combines well with courgettes, marrows, beans and mushrooms. It has a powerful enough flavour to stand up to garlic and together they make the classic pesto sauce. Basil's pungency increases with cooking. The fresh leaves keep their flavour if preserved in vinegar and oil.

CHERVIL

Chervil is one of the classic *finest herbes* much used in French cuisine. It has a delicate flavour and is suitable wherever parsley is used. Chop the fresh leaf into omelettes, salads, dressings and add to chicken before roasting. Add at the end of cooking so its flavour is not lost. Preserve in vinegar and oil.

CHIVES

Freshly chopped chives lift many foods above the mundane. Sprinkle them on soups, salads, chicken, potatoes, cooked vegetables and egg dishes. Blend chopped chives with butter to garnish grilled meats and fish. Use them in place of raw onion in hamburgers for a milder flavour. Blend with butter, mix in cream cheese, yogurt sauces for baked potatoes. Add at the end of cooking. Chives freeze well but are poor dried.

CORIANDER

The leaves and ripe seeds have two distinct flavours. The seeds are warmly aromatic and indispensable in tomato chutney and curries. They provide an excellent flavouring for vegetables, especially stir fried, and in soups, sauces and biscuits. The leaves have an earthy pungency, delicious in salads, vegetables and poultry dishes.

DILL

Frequently described as similar in flavour to caraway, aniseed and fennel, dill is like non of these. It has a totally unique, spicy green taste. Add whole seeds to potato salad, pickles, bean soups, salmon dishes, and apple pies. Ground, they can flavour herb butter, mayonnaise and mustard. The leaves go well with fish, cream cheese and cucumber.

FENNEL

With its pronounced aniseed flavour, fennel is an excellent digestive and reputed to be a slimming aid. Chop the stems when tender into salads. Stuff the leaves into oily fish such as mackerel and sprinkle finely chopped on salads and cooked vegetables. Add the seeds to sauces, breads, savoury biscuits and to the water for poaching fish. The swollen bulb of Florence fennel can be eaten raw in salads or cooked.

GARLIC

A strong flavouring for all savoury dishes, hot and cold. Rub a clove around a salad bowl to subtly flavour salads; add one or two cloves to dressings and marinades, or make garlic vinegar and oil. Mash with butter and bake in a French loaf or on grilled meat or fish. Insert sliced cloves into joints of meat before roasting. It can even be baked as a vegetable. The leaves have a lighter flavour.

Popular Culinary Herbs



LEMON BALM

Use the refreshing, lemon flavoured leaves fresh in salads; to make pleasant herbal tea or to give a lemon flavour to Indian tea. Add generously to a white sauce for fish and spread over chicken before roasting. Finely chopped leaves add a lemony sweetness to sauerkraut, mayonnaise, sauces and stuffings as well as fruit salads and custards. Freeze in ice cubes to add to drinks.

LOVAGE

The leaves and stems have a meaty flavour, but use sparingly until familiar with their potency. Fresh leaves make an interesting base on which to serve strong flavoured pate. Young leaves and blanched stems are good steamed as a vegetable and served with a white sauce. A brew of the leaves is like a yeast extract broth.

MINTS

With their clean, sharp flavours, the mints are an aid to the digestion and can be used individually or blended. Excellent in mint sauce, syrups, vinegar and in teas. Add to new potatoes, to a garlic and cream cheese dip and to a yogurt dressing or drink. Also mix with chocolate cakes, rich desserts and bake with raisins or blackcurrants in pastry. Crystallize the leaf for a sweet decoration.

OREGANO AND MARJORAM

Marjoram has a distinctive savoury flavour, while oregano is slightly stronger. Both dry well. Marjoram is suitable for thick vegetable soups, pasta, fish, game, beef, chicken, sausages and meat loaf. Tomatoes, courgettes, potatoes and peppers are enhanced by its flavour. It is also used in omelettes and cheese dishes. Oregano is good with pizzas; it can be used like marjoram, but more sparingly.

PARSLEY

The mild flavour and bright green leaves of parsley make it the most useful and popular kitchen herb. Add it to a bouquet garni with bay and thyme. When cooked, it serves to enhance the flavour of other foods and herbs. To increase its potency, use generous amounts and include the stems, which are more strongly flavoured. Feature it in bland dishes and add towards the end of cooking. Use in salads, sandwiches, soups, sauces, mayonnaise and egg dishes. Fry whole sprigs briefly to serve with fish.

ROSEMARY

This aromatic resinous leaf aids the digestion of fats and traditionally is sprinkled on to roast lamb and pork or added to chops, pigeon, sausage meats, pates and stuffings. Crumble dried leaves and chop fresh, or remove them before serving as they can be tough. Put a whole sprig in the oven to flavour baking bread. Put a sprig in oil or vinegar. Add leaves, pre-soaked on hot water to oranges soaked in wine.

and their uses

SAFFRON

Saffron is our most expensive seasoning due to the labour required for harvesting the individual stamens. Fortunately, only a pinch is required to colour and flavour a large dish. Good saffron should be less than a year old and a brilliant orange colour. It has a strong aroma and a pungent, warmly bitter flavour. When using threads, crush the required number and infuse in hot milk or liquid from the recipe. If using powder, infuse it in liquid or add it with the flour for cakes.

SAGE

Sage is a strongly flavoured, pungent herb which complements strongly flavoured foods and aids the digestion of fats. It makes a good flavouring for cheese and cream cheese dips. Use leaves in onion soup, with stewed tomatoes, omelettes, herb scones and bread. Try them in a sage jelly, butter or vinegar. If dried, sage must be of top quality as otherwise it acquires an unpleasant musty flavour.

SORREL

A sharp flavoured leaf with the tangy zest of lemon, sorrel adds piquancy to bland dishes and sauces. Sorrel soup is a classic and sorrel is often cooked and served like spinach.

SUMMER and WINTER SAVORY

The two savories have a similar flavour to thyme, with winter savory being marginally milder. Cook with fresh or dried beans and lentils or in a white sauce for bean dishes. Mix with parsley and chives for roasting duck. Sprinkle finely chopped fresh leaves on soups and sauces. Use to flavour vinegar.

SWEET CICELY

This is a mild flavoured leaf with a hint of aniseed. Add to tart fruit when stewing or making jam to reduce acidity and cut sugar requirements. Use fresh chopped leaves in salads, avocado dressing and cabbage water, and to garnish puddings, cakes, cold drinks and punches. Add green, unripe seeds to fruit salads. Boil the root, slice and serve cold with salad oil or add chopped root to stir-fried dishes.

THYME

Common thyme is used in a bouquet garni with parsley and bay and has a long history of culinary use. It stimulates the appetite and aids digestion of fatty food; useful with meat, shellfish, poultry and game. It is very pungent when fresh, so use with discretion. Try the lemon thymes in fish and poultry dishes.

TARRAGON

An aristocratic herb with a savoury flavour and hidden tang; one of the finest herbes with chervil and parsley. It is indispensable for Bearnaise and hollandaise sauces, soups, fish dishes and any delicate vegetables. It is particularly good stuffed in a roasting chicken and added to egg dishes.